

6 S.A. ARMoured DIVISION IN ITALY

WINTER 1944 - 1945

The period 20 - 23 October was the climax of the offensive, not only on 6 SA Armoured Divisional sector, but on the front of the whole Fifth Army. II US Corps had been attacking with great determination east of Route 65, and on 23 October 34 Division captured Mt Belmonte, only 9 miles from the centre of Bologna. "This was II Corps finest effort, and it was destined to be their last. The Germans, now under the supreme command of Gen Von Vietinghoff for Kesselring had been seriously wounded in an air attack, took desperate measures to ensure the defence of Bologna. From the Eighth Army front Von Vietinghoff brought over 90 Panzer Grenadiers and 1 Parachute Division, both famous for the defence of Cassino. II Corps was exhausted and these strong enemy reinforcements turned the scale. No further advance North-West could be made and on 27 October, Fifth Army went over to the defensive. To be robbed of a decisive success after so long and sanguinary a struggle was the more bitter in that the price already paid would have been heavy even if paid for victory."¹

It had been intended that 24 Guards Brigade should attack and capture Mt Sole as soon as 12 Motor Brigade had secured Mt Salvaro. The Guards attempted to carry out the programme, and crossed the flooded Setta on 25 October. An elaborate fireplan was drawn up for an attack on point 501, which lies on a ridge jutting out from the Sole — Caprara massif. The enemy yielded the point without fighting, and the menacing height of Sole lay directly in front of the Guards Brigade, as though inviting an attack. But torrential rain played havoc with communications and the attack was temporarily postponed. On 31 October word was received of Gen Mark Clark's intention to relinquish offensive operations for at least a month. In this decision he was strengthened by a grave shortage of ammunition for the Allied Armies of Italy.

On the Divisional left flank the CCB, (the American Battle Group operating under 6 Division's command), had been fighting their way forward up Highway 64. Supported by the fire of 4/22 Field Regiment and 3/24 Anti-Tank Battery, SA Artillery, the CCB attacked a ridge west of the Reno and captured Catell Accio on 29 October. Heavy German counter-attacks developed on subsequent days, and the 4/22 Field Regiment was called on for defensive fire. B Company Royal Natal Carbineers was put under American command, and sent across the Reno to stiffen the defence. After suffering considerable casualties the enemy abandoned his counter-attacks on 2 November. On 4 November the CCB passed out of 6 Division's command, and were shortly afterwards relieved by a Brazilian unit.

On 4 November a Divisional Operation Order announced that the Division was again under command of IV US Corps and gave instructions for holding the front. 24 Guards Brigade held the right flank, 12 Brigade the centre, and 11 Brigade the left. Aggressive patrolling was ordered with a view to an eventual attack on Mt Sole.

On 5 November the first frost occurred. Most of the men had now received battle dress but not a few individuals were still without it. Winter equipment, including rubber boots and leather jerkins, began to arrive.

Each battalion worked out a scheme for resting the troops. The plan generally favoured was to hold the line with three companies forward, and give one company a five day's rest.

Leave started, and as Florence and Pistoia were virtually American cities, Prato became the Divisional leave centre. The Union Defence Force Institute established an Outspan club in Castiglione and arranged cinema shows and

1. Operations of British, Indian, and Dominion Forces in Italy, Part III, page 14.

machine-gun fire was heavy, and the ground was held by those redoubtable opponents — 16 SS Division. 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles were put under 24 Guards Brigade and relieved the Grenadier Guards. The Battalion opened its attack on 8 December and stubborn fighting continued throughout the week. The Indians gained some ground, and the Divisional Artillery gave support. But the enemy's counter-attacks were very determined, and his artillery fire extremely heavy. On 15 December 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles withdrew to their original positions, and the fighting died down on the slopes of Mt Sole. Snow fell on 21 December, and on the 28th the capture of Mt Sole was indefinitely postponed.

From now on administration became the chief problem of the Division. By 10 January the snow on Point 826 was thigh deep, and the temperature had dropped to 20 degrees below freezing. Snow ploughs and bulldozers were called on to clear the roads, and pioneer companies and troops laboured to chip the ice off road surfaces. The recovery sections were particularly busy, and on January 31 Light Recovery Section recovered 547 vehicles, and back-loaded 144. Tanks were incapable of moving unaided on the iced roads, and 30 Heavy Recovery Section was called on to assist them.

Winter clothing came forward in good quantities, including snow-shoes and white snow-suits with hoods for use on patrol. Hot baths were provided by the mobile bath units.

As in 12 Brigade position at St Ella, mules and porters had to be used to get rations up to the forward positions. The food, although mostly tinned, was good and was carried up to forward companies in hotboxes.

Skiing and tobogganing were popular recreations, but on 28 January rain fell and the temperature rose sharply. Then came the thaw, adding greatly to the general inconvenience. Dugouts filled up with water and mud and slush made many men wish that winter would return.

The health of the troops remained good in these conditions, although there were many cases of trench foot. Some blamed the boots, other considered that foot-discipline was a fault. The front remained static, but patrolling in the bitter cold of January was a grim or

deal. Leaky boots and lack of waterproof trousering added to the difficulties of moving across naked snow on clear nights. One Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment patrol took seven hours to cover a mile across snow and ice. The Division passed under command of II US Corps on 15 January. This Corps instructed the Division to take a prisoner every three days. Battalions were required to make raids 30 to 50 strong to secure identifications. On the night of 3 February the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment had a sharp clash with an enemy party near Salvaro church, and secured a badly-wounded prisoner. By 10 February adequate identifications had been obtained of the enemy on the Divisional front. Deserters began to come in daily, and there was no longer any necessity for raids.

It was decided to rest the Division before the great offensive in the spring. The relief by the 1 US Armoured Division began on 19 February and was completed on the 24th. The Q Companies were kept very busy backloading ammunition and supplies.

THE BREAKTHROUGH IN APRIL 1945

The first months of 1945 saw important changes in the organisation of 6 SA Armoured Division. It was known that 24 Guards Brigade would pass out of command after relief, and it was essential to have another SA Infantry Brigade in the Division. On 13 January 1945, 13 SA Motor Brigade came into being and Lt Col J. Bester, DSO, Battalion Commander of the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment, was appointed Brigadier. The infantry battalion of the brigade was provided initially by the Royal Durban Light Infantry and Natal Mounted Rifles/SA Air Force, who switched to an infantry establishment and began training in infantry tactics. Artillery support was provided by 15 Field Regiment SA Artillery which was formed from elements of the Divisional Artillery and reinforcements from the Union. 5 Field Squadron, SA Engineer Corps came under command, and the Brigade commenced training in the Prato-Pistoia area.

The conversion of the Natal Mounted Rifles/SA Air Force to infantry deprived the Division of its Reconnaissance Unit, and accordingly an infantry company was drafted to the Pretoria Regiment. One infantry platoon was allotted to each squadron, to enable the Regiment to serve in a reconnaissance role.

The medium machine guns and mortars of the Royal Durban Light Infantry were distributed among infantry battalions, and each battalion was now equipped with three 4.2 inch mortars, four 3 inch mortars and six medium machine guns. In January 4/22 Field Regiment completed its conversion from Priests to Sextons (25 pr guns mounted on a Ram Chassis) and the armoured regiments were equipped with a new Sherman tank, mounting a 76 mm gun.

The Division concentrated in the Lucca area at the end of February. The men were delighted with their new quarters, situated in a lovely countryside, and took advantage of the opportunity of having some leave and recreation. Enthusiasm waned, however, when an intensive training programme began.

On leaving the line the Division bade farewell to its comrades in 24 Guards Brigade, and it was with genuine regret that the South Africans saw these splendid troops depart to Eighth Army. Brig Erskine, who had taken over from Brig Olive in November, said the Guards would always be proud to have served in 6 SA Armoured Division.

The leave and training programme had been planned on a six weeks cycle, but this had to be curtailed. On 28 March the Division issued detailed orders for the relief of 1 US Armoured Division in the old sector between the Reno and the Setta. The great offensive which was to destroy the German armies in Italy was about to begin.

Kesselring's successor, Gen Von Vietinghoff, was under no illusions about the coming storm, and the possibility of resisting it. He would have preferred to withdraw to the line of the PO. The German High Command, so far from agreeing to this, would not even allow Von Vietinghoff to carry out a limited withdrawal on Eighth Army Front, which would have effectually frustrated the Allied air and artillery programme. By insisting on the retention of the Appenine Line, Hitler had tied the German Army in Italy to an anvil.

During January and February four German divisions were drawn from Italy to attempt to dam the Russian tide, and these included those old opponents of the South Africans — the 16 SS and 356 Infantry Divisions. More would probably have been demanded, if the

Allied Air Force had not played such havoc with communications in Northern Italy, that it took weeks to move a division through the Alpine passes.

By comparison with their forces on other fronts, the Germans' army in Italy was still a formidable fighting machine, and on 10 April Von Vietinghoff had under his command twenty-one German divisions of all types, supported by a powerful force of artillery. Although the Allied armies were now pouring into Germany, morale was still high. The greatest weakness was an almost total lack of air support. Von Vietinghoff had only 260 tanks, and the petrol shortage compelled him to rely excessively on animal transport. The Allies planned to attack along practically the whole Italian front. Preliminary blows along the shores of the Adriatic and the Tuscan sea were to be followed a week later by an all-out assault by Eighth Army in the marshy country between Lake Comacchio and the Appenines. Three days later Fifth Army was to unleash II and IV US Corps in an offensive aimed at Bologna and the plain to the north west. 6 SA Armoured Division was given an important role in Fifth Army plan.

During the night 31 March/1 April 12 Mortar Brigade began its movement back into the line, and on 4 April took over command of the brigade sector from Combat Command A of 1 US Armoured Division. 11 Armoured Brigade took over their sector from Combat Command E on 5 April.

The Divisional sector lay between the rivers Reno and Setta and was held with 12 Mortar Brigade on the right and 11 Armoured Brigade on the left. The river Torricella was the inter-Brigade boundary.

11 Armoured Brigade had the 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles and two American units (19 Reconnaissance Squadron and 1 Battalion 135 RCT) under command. The Americans were serving as infantry. 13 Meter Brigade was to move up later on 12 Brigade right. Certain regrouping would then take place between the two brigades.

Early in March the enemy had withdrawn his line to the crest of the Sole-Caprara massif, and the South African Forward Defence Lines were now about 1000 yards nearer the enemy. The 77 Eastings Grid was the boundary line of two German divisions. The 94 Infantry Division

held the sector to the west, and there was little activity apart from some scattered shelling and harassing fire. An outline plan had been drawn up by Maj Gen Poole at the end of March. The initial attack was to be made on Mt Sole-Caprara by 12 Motor Brigade, which was to exploit to Mt Abelle. On the capture of the Sole-Caprara-Abelle area, 12 Motor Brigade was to advance along the ridge running north-east of Mt Sole, and capture Mt Santa Barbara. 13 Motor Brigade was to cover the right flank. Thereafter 13 Brigade was to take Mt Giovule and Mt Baco and destroy any German forces remaining between the Setta and the Reno. When this phase had been completed 12 Motor Brigade was to be prepared to cross the Reno. All attacks were to be supported by the Divisional Artillery and air support was promised on an unprecedented scale.

6 SA Armoured Division was the left-flanking formation of II US Corps. IV Corps was to open the battle on fifth Army front by attacking in the mountains west of the Reno, and then II Corps was to launch its assault.

Detailed planning for 6 Division's attack began on 5 April. The Divisional Commander met his staff and brigade commander, and they in turn had full discussions with their subordinates, and the commanders of supporting arms. 12 Motor Brigade report says:—**"When all the details of the operations had been thoroughly discussed and finalised verbally, the main Brigade Operation Order was issued, and that completed the planning. This method worked extremely well — there was no undue rush, no flood of documents, no confusion and no possibility of anyone not being fully in the picture. On the Staff side, the planning for the operation went off extremely smoothly"**.

12 Motor Brigade carried out detailed patrolling to reconnoitre the enemy's outpost positions, and to decide on suitable lines of advance. There was little interference from the enemy, but the area had been heavily mined, and a number of casualties were suffered.

On the night of 7/8 April the first of a series of full scale artillery shoots was carried out against enemy positions on 6 Division's front. The intention was to deceive the enemy regarding the time of the main assault, to shatter his morale and to induce him to disclose

his defensive fire tasks. The second and third objects were certainly not achieved, and the enemy showed little interest in the elaborate bombardments on the 7th, 8th and subsequent nights.

Meanwhile the great offensive had already begun on other sectors of the front. On 1 April a brilliant commando attack on the Adriatic coast threw 162 Turkoman Division into disorder. On 5 April the Japanese-Americans opened an offensive along the shore of the Tuscan sea. The attack met with great success, and the threat to the naval base of Spezia brought German reserves from the valley of the PO. On 10 April an artillery and air bombardment surpassing anything seen in Italy, heralded the advance of the Eighth Army. The enemy made the mistake of anticipating an attack along Route 9, while the main weight of the Eighth Army fell in the area south of Lake Commachio. The enemy was shaken by the intense air and artillery bombardment, and disconcerted by the use of large numbers of flame-throwing tanks. On 10 April Eighth Army made deep penetrations and although the Germans rallied, and fought back with their usual skill and tenacity, yet they were never able to recover from the initial shock or amend their faulty dispositions. Retreat to the much vaunted Genghis Khan Line brought no security, and on 15 April Eighth Army captured Bastia, and threatened the flank of all the German forces in Italy.

It had been intended that IV US Corps should open the Fifth Army attack on 12 April, but the weather was unfavourable for bombers and the offensive did not begin until the 14th. By the evening of that day advance units of the 1 US Armoured Division, on the left of the South Africans, had entered Vergato. Further to the west 10 US Mountain Division had taken its objectives, and was thrusting forward with great determination. On 15 April II US Corps began its attack, and 12 Motor Brigade was launched against Sole and Caprara.

Although not as high as Mt Stanco or Mt Salvaro, the extremely steep, bush-covered slopes of Sole and Caprara presented a most formidable obstacle. The ridge running along the crest of Sole and extending north east to Collina was a complete razorback, with no facilities for deployment. Mt Abelle was considerably lower than Sole or Caprara, but it

gave depth to the defence, and enemy posted here could shoot up any troops advancing down the northern slopes of these two mountains.

The positions in front of 12 Motor Brigade were held by 111 Battalion of 296 Regiment. This Battalion had a company on Sole, another on Caprara, and a third on Abelle. The troops were Austrians and Bavarians of good type and steady morale. The enemy's line ran north east along the ridge to Nuvoleta, and then down to the Setta to cover Vado. Reserves of approximately battalion strength were in the Mt Santa Barbara area. Beyond the Reno was the Genghis Khan Line, a reserve position to which the enemy could retreat if necessary. Intelligence reports indicated that it had been strongly fortified, but in fact very little had been done.

6 SA Armoured Division regrouped for the attack. On 9 April, 13 Motor Brigade moved up, with its headquarters located at La Torre. On 10 April the Royal Natal Carbineers came under command of 13 Brigade, and the Brigade took over the sector between Mt Sole and the river Setta, to protect the right flank of 12 Motor Brigade. 13 Brigade now consisted of the Natal Mounted Rifles/SA Air Force and the Royal Natal Carbineers with one squadron of the Special Service Battalion under command. On 8 April, the Royal Durban Light Infantry relieved two companies of the First City/Cape Town Highlanders in the centre of 12 Brigade front, thus releasing the latter battalion for the attack on Mt Sole. On the same day 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles came under 12 Brigade command, and relieved the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment in the Brigade left sector. The latter were now available to attack Mt Caprara. 12 Field Squadron was ordered to support 12 Brigade, which had one squadron Prince Alfred's Guard under command.

On 11 April Maj Gen Poole addressed officers and men of 12 Brigade down to platoon sergeants and put them "in the picture". On 13 April the enemy broke contact on Eighth Army front south east of Bologna and it was suspected that a general withdrawal had been ordered. Patrols were sent out, and one from the Royal Durban Light Infantry got within 200 yards of the crest of Sole. A blaze of fire established that the enemy was holding the position. Deserters confirmed this, and stated that extra ammunition had been issued

to meet the expected attack, and orders had been given to fight to the last man.

On the night of the 14th the 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles made a successful two platoon attack on an enemy post (Casa Poggiolo) which would have threatened the left flank of the attack on Caprara.

15 April was fine and clear. An observer noted:— "It is a lovely Sunday morning. The church bell rings out the masses, and the villagers of Lagaro (site of Divisional Headquarters) flock past the Armoured Command vehicles into the church. It is difficult to associate the atmosphere with that on an attack."

The blue sky augured well for the air bombardment and at 1300 hours the heavy bombers started to come over. For an hour and a half a steady stream of bombers in line abreast or Vic formation passed across the sky, but they dropped their loads well north of the Divisional front. At 1615 hours the first fighter-bombers appeared and dropped special liquid fuel type bombs on the slopes of Mt Caprara. There was a terrific flash of flame in each case followed by billowing black smoke. Every fifteen minutes six aircraft swooped down on Sole and Caprara, coming in extremely low and letting lose a mixture of fire-bombs and high explosives. Some aircraft used rockets and cannon-shell. Apart from a little machine-gun and cannon fire there was no reaction from the enemy. Indeed, although the bombardment was most spectacular and did much to encourage the troops, the results achieved were negligible. A few Germans suffered burns, but the enemy was well concealed in caves and dug-outs and the attacks made little impression. One fighter-bomber strafed the First City/Cape Town Highlanders dump area, nearly exploding the mortar ammunition. Casualties were caused and a panic started among the Italian porters.

At 2230 hours the artillery of II US Corps and the Divisional Artillery supported by selected troops of tanks, opened the most violent bombardment which the South Africans had seen in the campaign. The fire was so concentrated that it seemed more impressive than Alamein or Cassino. Under cover of the guns the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment and First City/Cape Town Highlanders went into the attack.

It was about a mile from the First City/Cape Town Highlanders assembly area to the crest of Sole, and the axis of advance lay along a ridge leading up to the mountain. C and D Companies led the attack and crossed their Start Line at 2300 hours. The enemy fired his mortar Defensive Fires, but casualties were light, and at 2350 hours C and D Companies started to climb Mt Sole. Nearing the crest C Company was held up by mines, but 2/Lt Mollett, without waiting for the mines to be cleared, dashed through them with a party of five men and reached the summit. One of the men was killed, but the party caught the enemy coming out of his deep shelters, and used their bayonets and grenades with good effect. 2/Lt Mollett received an immediate award of the DSO, a rare distinction for a platoon commander. Passages were cleared through the minefields and C and D Companies both got platoons on to the summit. By 0430 hours Mt Sole was firmly held. All this time the German mortar fire was increasing in intensity, but the artillery and 4.2 inch mortars brought down counter-mortar fire and broke up weak attempts to counter-attack.

Meanwhile a grim struggle was being waged for Mt Caprara. So steep are the slopes of Caprara that the only suitable approach is from the direction of Caprara village. This meant that the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment had to make a long march from the Assembly Areas in the Mt Termine area, skirt the southern slopes of Mt Caprara, take Caprara village, and then assault up the steep, shaly slopes of the mountain.

At 2030 hours A and B Companies moved off from their assembly area to the Forming Up Point, situated in a valley south of San Martino. The companies had not yet arrived at the Forming Up Point when their difficulties began: advance parties, laying lamps to indicate the Start Line, were fired on by 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles on the left flank. As soon as the artillery barrage opened, the German artillery and mortars came to life, brought down their Defensive Fire tasks, and laid searching fire along the gullies. B Company was caught in heavy concentrations of artillery and mortar fire when moving up from the Forming Up Point, and suffered many casualties. The advance of A and B Companies continued on Caprara village, but B Company's

losses were so heavy, that at midnight C Company received orders to take over their task. Throughout the night the Start Line was subjected to intense mortar and artillery fire, and the Italian stretcher-bearers became demoralised. Cape Corps batmen were improvised into stretcher-bearing parties. B Company was soon reduced to 17 men, and D Company moving up in support, had 32 casualties between the Start Line and the First Bound.

At 0200 hours, A and C Companies skirted Caprara village and began the assault up the precipitous mountain. The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment official report says:—**“At this stage communications became almost impossible. A and C Companies for a time lost contact with each other but continued the advance meeting stiff resistance; wire obstacles were encountered and casualties suffered on Shu mines causing A Company to move over to C Company. Halfway up the mountain both companies were pinned down by machine-gun fire emanating from a pill-box. As further progress could not be made after several attempts, and as daylight was fast approaching, which event would leave the companies in a precarious situation, the Company Commanders decided to join forces and storm the obstacle. This they did, making a desperate bayonet charge up the steep almost precipitous slopes, and rooted the enemy out of the pill-box and out of his foxholes and dug-outs.”** The success of this final assault was due mainly to the efforts of Maj D. G. William MC, who was primarily responsible for organising it. The majority of German positions were on the reverse slope of the mountain, and owing to difficulties of crest clearance had been quite untouched by the terrific bombardment which had pulverised the forward slope and made it very difficult for the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment to ascend. Indeed artillery preparation played no part in the success of the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment on Caprara.

The area round the crest was found to be alive with mines, and small arms fire came from the Mt Sole direction. By 0800 hours the firing died down, and A and C Companies dug-in on their objectives. Throughout the morning the enemy continued to mortar the axis of advance. Three Prince Alfred's Guard tanks succeeded in getting on to the neck between

Sole and Caprara but another troop which followed the track through San Martino ran into mines, and two tanks were immobilised.

The attack on Mt Caprara cost the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment 168 casualties of whom 24 were killed. 20 Enemy dead were counted, and 39 prisoners taken.

The enemy still contested the north west slopes of the mountain, but the battalion held positions providing observation over Mt Castellino and the Caprara-Abelle valley. It was now possible for the First City/Cape Town Highlanders to exploit to Mt Abelle. At 0500 hours on the 16th the First City/Cape Town Highlanders sustained a grievous loss when Lt Col Duncan was killed by a mine.

Maj Sholto Douglas took over command. The morning of the 16th passed quietly with only intermittent mortaring by the enemy. At 1730 hours A and B Companies moved to the attack on Mt Abelle, supported by artillery and mortar fire. A dangerous cross-fire developed from Point 606 to the north east of Sole, and this position was engaged by the artillery and battalion 3 inch mortars. Mt Abelle was captured after slight resistance, but machine-gun fire from Point 606 continued to be troublesome. During the operation B Company Royal Durban Light Infantry moved on to the eastern crest of Sole to give flank support. Towards last light an enemy counter-attack on the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment came in from the direction of Campodello. The artillery brought down Defensive Fire and the 4.2 inch mortars, which had been brigaded for the action, joined in with their heavy bombs. The infantry then charged down the slope and put the enemy to flight.

Thus by the evening of 16 April the capture of the three main features — Mt Sole, Mt Abelle and Mt Caprara — had been successfully completed. The American Division of II US Corps were not so fortunate in their attacks east of the Setta. After violent fighting on the 16th the Germans still held Monterumici and Mt Adone. On the other hand, west of the Reno, both Vergato and Mt Pero were now in American hands.

The success of the South African attack was due to the sheer determination of the assaulting infantry coupled with the sound tactical judgement of the battalion, company and platoon

commanders. The artillery support was heavy and accurate, but the German dug-outs were so deep and well-constructed that the enemy suffered little from artillery fire.

On the night of the 16th/17th the Royal Durban Light Infantry began their task of exploiting along the ridge running north east from Mt Sole. In their advance to the Start Line A and C Companies engaged and drove back an enemy counter-attack force advancing on Mt Sole.

Confusion was caused by having to fight for the Start Line and considerable machine-gun fire was encountered. Points 606 and 551 were occupied, but Collina was not reached. Towards dawn a counter-attack on Point 606 was repulsed, while the First City/Cape Town Highlanders beat off a raid on the north west slopes of Sole. During the night the Royal Durban Light Infantry took 30 prisoners for a loss of 12 wounded. Subsequent information showed that the advance of the Royal Durban Light Infantry had dislocated a strong attempt to recapture Mt Sole.

During the afternoon of 17 April patrols of the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment got across to Mt Castellino and reported that it was clear of the enemy. The Royal Durban Light Infantry, however, failed in attempts to reach Collina. The enemy held the position in strength, and his mortar fire was heavy. 12 Brigade narrative says:— **“Exploitation along the ridge towards Nuvoleta was proving an extremely difficult undertaking in the face of strong opposition.”**

The ridge was a complete razor-back with no opportunities whatsoever for deployment, while the enemy positions along the very crest of the ridge were largely immune to artillery and mortar fire which was ineffective if it fell either slightly short or slightly over.

At 2040 hours on the night of the 17/18th C Company Royal Durban Light Infantry launched a set-piece attack on Collina. Despite concentrated artillery and mortar support, the attack was repulsed. The enemy's fire was heavy and he launched a number of rockets at close range. One of these wounded the Company Commander and knocked out a whole platoon.

It seemed as though the 6 Division was in for a long and bloody struggle on the ridge

leading to Mt Santa Barbara, but the morning of the 18th brought a miraculous change.

On 17 April the II US Corps had warned that a breakdown of enemy resistance might take place at any moment, and preparations should be made for a rapid follow-up. The stern resistance to the Royal Durban Light Infantry seemed to disprove this optimistic theory, and plans were considered for pushing the Pretoria Regiment and the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment down the Reno, in the hope of attacking the Collina — Santa Barbara ridge from the rear. At 0800 hours on the 18th, however, two deserters on 13 Brigade front brought news that 157 Mountain Division had received orders to withdraw during the night. Reports from 88 US Division stated that Monterumici and Mt Adone had been abandoned.

The Royal Durban Light Infantry at once pushed forward patrols and first Nuvoleta and then Mt Santa Barbara were reported clear. A number of prisoners were picked up, who confirmed orders to retreat to the Genghis Khan Line. It was fairly certain however, that the Germans would have to fall back to the PO.

The enemy had no alternative to a rapid withdrawal on II Corps front. On 17 April the Eighth Army captured Argenta and threatened a breakthrough to Ferrara. On IV Corps front 10 US Mountain Division had made a remarkable advance and reached Mt Pastore, thus outflanking the so-called Genghis Khan Line. During the Sole-Caprara-Collina battle 12 Mortar Brigade suffered the following casualties:—

Royal Durban Light Infantry	6 killed	45 wounded
First City/Cape Town Highlanders	31 killed	70 wounded
Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment	24 killed	144 wounded
Frontier Force Rifles	9 killed	50 wounded
	—	—
	70 killed	309 wounded
	—	—

During the whole operation 170 prisoners were taken.

The enemy was on the run. The pursuit to the Alps had begun.

THE PURSUIT TO THE ALPS

On 19 April an observer at Divisional Headquarters noted:— “No guns can be heard today: all is quiet”. 6 SA Armoured Division was re-organising for the pursuit, but delay was inevitable while II US Corps adjusted its dispositions. On the evening of the 18th, 13 Motor Brigade had occupied Mts Giovule and Baco without resistance. Reinforced by 4/13 Frontier Force Rifles and with the Special Service Battalion temporarily under command this brigade was ordered to secure a bridgehead over the Reno, and continue the advance until relieved by II Armoured Brigade. The latter brigade, with the First City/Cape Town Highlanders under command, was to act as the main thrust of the Division. 12 Motor Brigade with the Prince Alfred’s Guard under command, was to support the main thrust.

The situation was so fluid that it proved impossible to adhere to pre-arranged plans. Four American divisions, and 6 SA Armoured Division, were all trying to debouch into the PO valley west of Bologna, and mines and demolitions blocked the few available roads. It says much for Fifth Army engineers and staff, that traffic congestion did not become acute, and that 34 US Division was able to enter Bologna on 21 April.

6 SA Armoured Division had virtually no more fighting in the Appenines. The one aim of the enemy was to get to the PO crossings, but he left a considerable number of stragglers in the mountains, and several hundred prisoners were picked up during the thrust down Route 64. They seldom showed fight.

The Special Service Battalion leading the advance of 13 Brigade reached the outskirts of Casalecchio on the evening of 20 April, and then 11 Armoured Brigade with the SSB back under command, passed into the van on the 21st. The long bloody struggle in the mountains was over, and the fertile plains of Northern Italy lay ahead.

6 SA Armoured Division was given the task of leading the advance of II US Corps. To quote from 6 Division Operation Instruction of 21 April:— **“The advance of SA Armoured Division will be carried out with the utmost speed and boldness on a broad front. Enemy rearguards and delaying positions will be by-**

MAP 6

AREA BOLOGNA TREVISO

ADVANCE OF 8 SA ARMED DIV
MAIN ROADS



passed. Important road centres, stream crossings, etc., will be held until relieved by infantry divisions." II Armoured Brigade was directed through San Giovanni to Finale Nell Emilia and 12 Motor Brigade to Camposanto. Both brigades were to seize crossings over the Panaro river. 13 Brigade was to concentrate north of Route 9 in Divisional reserve. The Pretoria Regiment was detached from 11 Brigade command, and was ordered to protect the Division right flank, and contact Eighth Army in the vicinity of Bondeno. The American units under command had now left 11 Brigade.

By-passing Bologna, the tanks of the Special Service Battalion rumbled off at 7030 hours on the 21st. After many weary months 11 Armoured Brigade had returned to mobile warfare. The tank crews were filled with tremendous enthusiasm and were determined to make the most of the opportunity.

Sweeping up the long straight road to San Giovanni, the Special Service Battalion soon started to collect prisoners and stragglers. At 1100 hours shots were exchanged with enemy tanks, supported by self-propelled guns and bazookas. The Special Service Battalion was confined to a strip of ground on both sides of the road, bounded by a railway line on one flank and a dyke on the other. After a severe fire-fight the Special Service Battalion tanks fought their way forward to within 1½ miles of San Giovanni, but further progress was barred by a blown bridge. The Special Service Battalion knocked out 2 Mark 4 tanks and 5 guns, for a loss of 3 tanks disabled. Meanwhile the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment and A Squadron Special Service Battalion struck opposition at Calderara Di Reno to the east of the railway line, and the village was bombarded by 4/22 Field Regiment. An enemy tank was put out of action and the place was occupied that evening. 11 Armoured Brigade rounded up 300 prisoners on the 21st, and identifications from many battalions illustrated the confusion of retreat. Further to the east the Pretoria Regiment reached Longara at nightfall, after meeting considerable opposition from bazookas and losing two tanks. The regiment rounded up 150 prisoners.

It had been a successful day for the South Africans, but the country was badly cut by

dykes and canals, and the going was by no means easy.

San Giovanni was occupied by American troops on the night of the 21/22nd, and the advance of the 6th Division was resumed on the 22nd on a two brigade front. 11 Armoured Brigade moved on Finale Nell Emilia while 12 Motor Brigade advanced on Camposanto. The orders to the Division were to seize the crossings over the Panaro river at all costs.

The Special Service Battalion, with B Company Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment under command, met considerable opposition just north of San Giovanni. The enemy had organised very strong anti-tank defence with guns and tanks concealed among houses and hayricks. B Squadron executed a flanking movement, and after severe fighting the enemy withdrew. Another strong rear-guard position was encountered at Decima. B Squadron again moved to a flank, while the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment assisted the tanks to "winkle out" snipers and bazookamen. At nightfall the column was still some 5 miles south of Finale. The Special Service Battalion claimed the destruction of 7 German tanks, but 8 Shermans and 3 Stuarts were destroyed or disabled.

The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment with C Squadron of Prince Alfred's Guard and one battery 1/6 Field Regiment under command, led the advance of 12 Brigade, and moving very fast through San Giovanni and Crevalcore, reached the outskirts of Camposanto at 1245 hours. There was no opposition, and progress was not impeded by demolitions or mines. Endless columns of American marching troops were passed on the road.

The Panaro has high banks overgrown by grass, and the river is unfordable on foot. B Company, Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment, leading the advance, reached the bridge at Camposanto at about 1030 hours and found it intact. Camposanto lay on the northern bank of the Panaro. American troops had already reached the river, but drew back in the face of heavy small arms fire.

The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment made an attempt to rush the bridge with an infantry platoon, but the platoon was driven back by machine-gun fire along a fixed line. For two hours nothing was achieved, and it was im-

possible for the troops to show themselves without being shot at. The enemy had no cable to enable him to demolish the bridge from a distance and tried to send parties on to the bridge to destroy it. These were driven back by the fire of the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment.

Finally Prince Alfred's Guard tanks were brought up to give supporting fire and artillery concentrations were laid on. Covered by this fire, three carriers loaded with troops rushed the bridge. 46 prisoners were taken in Camposanto.

The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment had achieved a notable success. On the evening of 22 April 12 Motor Brigade received orders to hand over Camposanto to an American unit, and to move with all speed along the south bank of the Panaro to Finale Nell Emilia. The plan was designed to trap considerable enemy forces caught between the converging Fifth and Eighth Armies, and still south of the Panaro.

The German army in Italy was now in its death-throes. The pace of withdrawal was limited to that of animals and infantry, all the reserves had been engaged, and allied aircraft speedily turned the PO crossings into deathtraps. On 21 April an Eighth Army armoured column burst out from the Argenta area, and driving along the Reno occupied Reggio Renaticio that night. Sweeping on in a north westerly direction Eighth Army spearheads reached the outskirts of Bondeno on the evening of the 22nd. This dramatic advance out off the retreat of the greater part of 1 Parachute Corps and four other German divisions. A battle of annihilation began between the Panaro and the Reno.

Both 12 and 11 Brigades were now directed on Finale. This small town lay on the northern bank of the Panaro River, and now that Bondeno was lost, the bridges across the Panaro at Finale were virtually the only escape route for the numerous German forces in the Cento area. The Panaro is not a formidable obstacle, but is too deep for wading, and its steep banks form an impassable obstacle for vehicles. There were two bridges at Finale — a stone bridge leading into the town, and a wooden bridge some hundreds of yards to the east.

Although the Special Service Battalion had halted about 5 miles from Finale on the even-

ing of the 22nd, the Germans in that area had already felt the weight of the 6th Division. The 7/23 Medium Regiment narrative says that on the evening of the 22nd their observation posts reported great numbers of vehicles moving along the roads into Finale, whereupon the Regiment, and the 4/22 Field Regiment put down a series of concentrations **"and did tremendous damage"**.

The advance of 12 Motor Brigade was led by the Royal Durban Light Infantry with B Squadron Prince Alfred's Guard under command. The Royal Durban Light Infantry column advanced rapidly along the south bank of the Panaro, and by 2045 hours on the 22nd the troops were within a mile of Finale. Here they struck against the flank of an enemy column of vehicles and tanks which was moving into the town. Confused fighting broke out in the darkness, and two Prince Alfred's Guard tanks were destroyed. But the Royal Durban Light Infantry maintained positions within 500 yards of the road, and the Prince Alfred's Guard tanks and battalion mortars fired steadily into the column. During the proceedings the stone bridge was demolished, but how, or by whom, is obscure. It seems probable that most of the Germans opposing the Royal Durban Light Infantry then betook themselves to the wooden bridge and crossed the Panaro by this means. At any rate the fighting died down at dawn, and a patrol of the Royal Durban Light Infantry entered Finale and found the place clear of the enemy. The Royal Durban Light Infantry had 8 wounded during the action, and Prince Alfred's Guard lost 2 killed and 1 wounded.

At 0705 hours on the 23rd 12 Brigade received orders to concentrate and resume the advance through Camposanto to the PO. The Royal Durban Light Infantry was ordered to relieve the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment. 11 Armoured Brigade was ordered to clear up the Finale area and during the day the Special Service Battalion, Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment and First City/Cape Town Highlanders rounded up some 900 prisoners south of the town. The Germans had a number of trenches in the area, and considerable opposition was encountered from snipers and Spandau posts, but organised resistance broke down during the day. The utter confusion of the enemy is shown by the fact that prisoners were taken from no less

than eight divisions. During the morning contact was made with 6th British Armoured Division of Eighth Army.

The road leading into Finale was choked with vehicles of every description all jammed together in a shattered mass. The Divisional recording officer notes — "From the bridge over the canal to the Panaro there had been a solid mass of carts, oxen, mules and horses; and trucks, guns towed and self-propelled and tanks. A way had that morning (the 24th) been bulldozed through the mass. We walked through in avenue of destruction. Many of the vehicles were still smouldering. We followed the line of wreckage and came to the river. Here there had been a low-level camouflaged wooden bridge, some half a mile east of the main concrete at Finale. The 10 Foot span nearest to the southern bank had burnt, and was in fact still smouldering — Two lines of traffic stretched away from the bridge along a cutting, along the levee top, and down the levee to the road. Here and there Volkswagens had crept up to form three lines of traffic. In the 600 yards between the canal bridge and the river bridge, there must have been the remains of 100 carts, 50 trucks, half a dozen Self-Propelled, and a dozen 20 mm guns.² A similar stream of destruction approached the Panaro bridge from the east —. It was a staggering sight to see all this devastation. One felt it was ample retribution for the *Gazala Gallop*".

Prisoners stated that the initial block was caused by fighter bombers, and then the artillery took full advantage of the congestion. German aircraft put in an appearance on the nights of the 21/22nd and 22/23rd and inflicted some casualties on the Division. A Stuka was shot down by B Troop of 1/12 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery.

On the morning of the 23rd 12 Motor Brigade began its drive to the PO. After a delay of some hours caused by the bridge at Campo-santo being blocked by American traffic the Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment crossed the Panaro at 1030 hours. The advance was pressed during the afternoon and C Squadron Prince Alfred's Guard which accompanied the advance guard, got in some effective shooting at disorganised groups. 150 prisoners were collected, but progress was hampered by American units moving along the roads in the

same area. The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment column harboured some five miles from the PO. During the advance they noted that the northern sky was black with smoke, and that fighter bombers were continually overhead.

On the afternoon of the 24th 12 Brigade reached the PO in the Felonica area. Large numbers of stragglers were trapped on the south bank and the area was littered with guns, tanks, transport and war material of all sorts. The Wits Rifles/De la Rey Regiment rounded up 487 prisoners and the Royal Durban Light Infantry over 250. The latter battalion captured a complete German hospital and staff. The Pretoria Regiment, which was acting in an independent role, also reached the PO that day and took 363 prisoners. Opposition was sporadic and unorganised.

11 Armoured Brigade completed the clearing-up of the Finale area on 24 April, while 13 Motor Brigade concentrated south of the Panaro ready to support 12 Brigade.

Further to the west 10 US Mountain Division had crossed the PO in the San Bennetto area. On the night of the 24/25th a Royal Durban Light Infantry patrol swam the PO and reported that the north bank was only lightly held. This was fortunate for the PO at this point was over 150 yards broad, and a very difficult obstacle. Bridging material was not immediately available but five assault boats were brought up during the night. A and B Companies Royal Durban Light Infantry crossed the river the next morning and established a bridgehead against slight opposition. 12 Field Squadron operated a raft for jeeps and carriers, and 10 DUKWS (amphibious lorries) were used to ferry troops over. 12 Brigade Group concentrated on the south bank to follow up the crossing. More rafts arrived on 26 April but heavy rain made the banks of the river soft and muddy and greatly impeded loading operations. The crossing of 12 Brigade was completed on 27 April. The greater part of the Brigade crossed by the ferries but 240 vehicles were sent over a bridge at Ostiglia.

Wholesale disaster was overtaking the Germans in Northern Italy. On 25 April 88 US Division made a remarkable advance from the Ostiglia bridgehead and reached Verona. All

2. This is a conservative estimate.

lateral communication between the German forces in the plain was cut, and the retreat of German forces west of the Tyrol was finally closed when Fifth Army spearheads took Como on 28 April. "Army Group C was now a mere skeleton force and of its experienced and well trained divisions there was not one left worth the name. All their energy had been expended south of the PO and without weapons and ammunition retreat had become a rout. — South of the PO practically all the tanks, assault guns, and heavy anti-tank guns were lost or stranded for lack of petrol and there was little left of the artillery".³

In these circumstances it was hopeless for the German command to hold a line along the Adige, or even to put up a serious defence in the Tyrol. Strong defences had been constructed during the winter east of the Adige River, but neither troops nor guns were available to hold them.

On 27 April the Royal Durban Light Infantry led the advance of 12 Motor Brigade to the Adige, and the river was reached in the Castagnaro area. At 1420 hours D Company commenced a crossing using a boat supplied by partisans. These were soon supplemented by American DUKWS, and during the evening the whole battalion crossed the river, together with a troop for Prince Alfred's Guard tanks. The crossing was unopposed and a number of stragglers were collected on the East bank. On the morning of the 28th the Royal Durban Light Infantry occupied Boschi, and at this point 12 Brigade passed into reserve. 13 Motor Brigade with the Pretoria Regiment under command, was ordered to take the lead, with 11 Armoured Brigade moving in close support. The task of 6 Division was to maintain contact with Eighth Army, and protect the right flank of II US Corps.

On the morning of the 28th 13 Brigade crossed the Adige near Legnago, on a bridge laid by American engineers. The Natal Mounted Rifles/SA Air Force led the way without waiting for the Pretoria Regiment tanks to cross the river. No resistance was encountered until Noventa was reached, some 15 miles from the Adige. Pretoria Regiment tanks were called up and the advance continued until the head of the column struck the strong defences of the Venetian Line, and came under heavy anti-tank fire. A Sherman was destroyed, and two others immobilised. A group of Pretoria

Regiment tanks moved to a flank and broke the German defences west of the Legnaro — Vicenza road. Barbed wire obstacles and anti-tank ditches were not covered by fire. Pill-boxes were found unoccupied. 13 Brigade continued its drive to the Bacchiglione River, which was reached that evening. Pretoria Regiment tanks advancing up the main Vicenza road were held up by a canal and a blown bridge, and were received with heavy fire. Accordingly the Royal Natal Carbineers with Pretoria Regiment reconnaissance tanks under command, were ordered to move to Montegaldella. The Royal Natal Carbineers collected a number of prisoners but failed to capture the bridge at this point in the face of machine-gun fire. The enemy blew the bridge in the early hours of the 29th. During the day 88 US Division captured Vicenza after stiff fighting and 2 New Zealand Division reached the outskirts of Padua.

On the night of the 28th 6 Division Headquarters ordered the advance to continue on a two brigade front. 11 Armoured Brigade was to advance on Treviso and assist the Americans in capturing that important town, while 13 Brigade was to maintain touch with Eighth Army and follow a route south of the main Vicenza — Treviso axis. Both 11 and 13 Brigades succeeded in capturing bridges across the Bacchiglione. Early on the 29th carriers of the Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment occupied Longare and found the bridge undamaged, while the Royal Natal Carbineers crossed by a bridge south east of Monte Galdella.

Both brigades drove on to the Brenta against slight opposition. They collected hundreds of prisoners, and reached Brenta that evening. D Company Royal Natal Carbineers was involved in a sharp action at Limena, and the enemy's resistance was not overcome until the battalion mortars and the guns of 15 Field Regiment had been brought into action. A Pretoria Regiment tank was destroyed here. A Royal Natal Carbineers patrol crossed the Brenta at Curtarolo using a captured raft, and 8 Field Squadron threw a Bailey Bridge over the river during the night of the 29/30th. While reconnoitring the bridging site the Commanding Officer 8 Field Squadron and two Other Ranks were killed by bazooka fire.

3. Operations of British Indian and Dominion Forces in Italy, Part IV, page 10.

11 Armoured Brigade crossed at Curtarolo on the morning of the 30th, and by nightfall was within three miles of Treviso. 500 prisoners were collected during the day, and it was clear that the war in Italy was virtually over. The New Zealanders were in Venice, and the Americans had taken Treviso.

On 1 May 6 Division received orders to suspend its advance into Ventia, and move to Milan.

There were still considerable German forces in Piedmont, and it was necessary to send reinforcements to that area. On 2 May while the long columns of divisional transport trundled westwards across the Lombard plain, news was received of the unconditional surrender of the German forces in Italy.

Divisional casualties in April and May 1945 totalled 605. The Division captured 4,366 prisoners during the period.

During the final phase of the Italian campaign, 6 SA Armoured Division had an opportunity of revering to its true role. Admittedly opposition soon collapsed, but the Division certainly acted with the "speed and boldness" laid down in its Operation Instruction of 21 April. A feature of the fighting south of the PO was the way in which artillery, infantry and armour acted in close co-operation.

The decisive factor during the German retreat was undoubtedly the overwhelming Allied air superiority, and the merciless attacks of the fighter bombers.

ORDER OF BATTLE — 6 SA ARMoured DIVISION

(As at the time of arrival of 6 SA Armoured Division in Italy)

Headquarters, 6 SA Armoured Division

Headquarters, SA Artillery
Headquarters, SA Engineer Corps
Headquarters, SA Corps of Signals
Headquarters, Q Services
Headquarters, T Services
66 SA Field Security Section
Air Photograph Interpretation Section
Meteorological Section, SA Air Force
6 SA Armoured Divisional Headquarters Squadron.

11 Armoured Brigade

Headquarters, 11 Armoured Brigade

Armour

Prince Alfred's Guard
Pretoria Regiment (Princess Alice's Own)
Special Service Battalion
Motor Battalion
Imperial Light Horse/Kimberley Regiment

12 Motorised Brigade

Headquarters, 12 Motorised Brigade

Infantry

1 Royal Natal Carbineers
Royal Durban Light Infantry
First City/Cape Town Highlanders
Witwatersrand Rifles/Regiment De la Rey

Divisional Troops

Armour (Reconnaissance Regiment)
Natal Mounted Rifles/SA Air Force

Artillery

1/6 Field Regiment, SA Artillery
4/22 Field Regiment, SA Artillery
7/23 Medium Regiment, SA Artillery
1/11 Anti-tank Regiment, SA Artillery
1/12 Light Anti-aircraft Regiment, SA Artillery

Engineers

8 Field Squadron, SA Engineer Corps
12 Field Squadron, SA Engineer Corps
17 Field Park Squadron, SA Engineer Corps.

Signals

6 Armoured Divisional Signals Squadron, SA Corps of Signals
6 Armoured Divisional Artillery Signals Squadron, SA Corps of Signals
17 Armoured Brigade Signals Squadron, SA Corps of Signals
14 Motorised Brigade Signals Squadron, SA Corps of Signals

Q Services

55 Q Company, Q Services Corps
56 Q Company, Q Services Corps
57 Q Company, Q Services Corps
58 Q Company, Q Services Corps
59 Q Company, Q Services Corps
73 Bulk-breaking Platoon, Q Services Corps
74 Bulk-breaking Platoon, Q Services Corps
75 Bulk-breaking Platoon, Q Services Corps
136 Tank-transporter Company, Q Services Corps

Medical

19 Field Ambulance, SA Medical Corps
20 Field Ambulance, SA Medical Corps
6 Field Hygiene Section, SA Medical Corps
6 Armoured Divisional Dental Unit, SA Medical Corps.

T Services

3 Armoured Divisional Workshop, T Services Corps
11 Armoured Brigade Workshop, T Services Corps
10 Motorised Brigade Workshops, T Services Corps
14 Armoured Divisional 2 Line Transport Workshops, T Services Corps
6 Armoured Divisional Q and T Stores Field Park, T Services Corps.

Provost

6 Armoured Divisional Provost Company, SA Corps of Military Police.

Postal

6 Armoured Divisional Postal Unit

Reserve Group

Headquarters, 6 SA Armoured Divisional Reserve Group

Natal Mounted Reserve Group
Reserve Armoured Regiment
Reserve Motorised Battalion
Reserve Artillery Regiment, SA Artillery
Reserve Field Squadron, SA Engineer Corps
Reserve Signals Squadron, SA Corps of Signals
Reserve Q Company, Q Services Corps
Reserve Field Ambulance, SA Medical Corps
Reserve Workshop, T Services Corps
Reserve Company, Cape Corps
6 SA Armoured Division began reorganising in the Lucca area on 13 January 1945, when 13 Motorised Brigade was formed. Its organisation is given below.

13 Motorised Brigade

Headquarters, 13 Motorised Brigade.

Infantry

Royal Durban Light Infantry
Natal Mounted Rifles/SA Air Force

Additional Division Troops

15 Field Regiment, SA Artillery
5 Field Squadron, SA Engineer Corps
18 Motorised Brigade Signals Squadron, SA Corps of Signals.